

## Protective Instincts

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Summary: After the events of 'Animal House', the people and dragons of Berk take shelter in the Great Hall to wait out another devastating winter storm. Hiccup discovers a surprising secret about the Thorston twins.

## Protective Instincts

There was no time wasted making boundaries for the animals once they'd been herded into the Great Hall. A makeshift corral was formed out of benches for the yaks and sheep, and the chickens were taken to a warm niche near the fire, that had been piled with straw, grass, and whatever materials people could grab at short notice.

Mulch had grabbed a few sacks of corn and feed for the livestock. It would last them a few days, but once the storm passed, they would have to unbury the coop and stables up at the farm. He could have carried more if he'd had Bucket's help, but the poor man was laid out on one of the tables, still moaning. The first storm had passed, but there were more quickly on the way " and if Bucket's moaning wasn't enough indication of that, then the black clouds moving in fast on the horizon were.

Someone had given him a pillow and drawn a blanket over him, but with all the work to still be done, nobody could really stand watch by his side. Stormfly, Toothless and Hookfang were lighting every brazier they could find " obviously more interested in making the Great Hall into an indoor volcano to counter the cold outside. The rest had comfortably settled down in niches and corners.

Some kids were already curling up in a pile around Meatlug, who was purring her approval. In the middle of trying to convince Toothless that it really didn't need to be sweltering inside for them to all survive, Hiccup was pulled away to help carry in firewood from the shed. Gobber had set up a passing line to move the wood in more quickly, before the woodshed could be further buried by snow.

He was between Ruffnut and Tuffnut (probably the reason he'd been called over actually) and listened without comment as the twins bickered over him about which of the Gods was more epic. Tuffnut was going for Loki, but Ruffnut seemed to favor Skadi, and each delighted in promoting their choice by loudly dissing the other's.

"Skadi was gross â€" ew â€" she totally had a thing for her old man's feet, okay?"

"At least she never got impregnated by a horse!" Ruff shot back.

"Hey, it was an epic horse! The only thing Skadi ever made was frost and snow and all the other stuff that sucks about winter."

This went on for quite some time, but Hiccup was relieved to be out of the storm and getting drowsy with all the heat, so he continued to work in silence between the twins. A sudden silence jolted him out of his daze and he realized he was now passing firewood from Fishlegs to Snoutlout.

"Uh, where'd the twins go?" he blurted, more concerned with how long he'd been out of it.

"Oh, your dad pulled them aside to go take care of that fisherman guy," Snotlout said, looking irritated. "What's his face with the bucket on his head."

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "You mean Bucket?"

"Yeah, the poor guy's in real pain. I'd hate to have a wound like that â€" that tightened all the time when the air pressure changed," Fishlegs said. He turned pink then, and looked at Hiccup's leg. "Um, I mean . . ."

"Don't worry about it, Fishlegs. It hurts sometimes, but not nearly as bad as his seems to," Hiccup assured him.

"Well I think he's just being a big baby," Snotlout remarked. "So his hat's too tight, why doesn't he just take it off and get a helmet like a normal viking? Or just nothing, not like he's got any brains to protect anymore."

"Don't let Ruff or Tuff hear you say that," Fishlegs warned him, voice low. That caught Hiccup's intrigue.

"What? Why not?" Hiccup asked.

"Oh, um, they might make fun of him, that's all."

For the first time since Hiccup had really gotten to know Fishlegs, he was surprised to actually hear a direct lie come out of the teenager's mouth. The fact that his face had grown pinker and he nearly dropped the next piece of firewood in fidgety nervousness gave it away.

"Alright, that's all the wood we'll need â€" should last us a few days if we're careful," Gobber shouted. He disbanded the line, sending some people to get platters of boar meat and porridge from

the kitchen. Fishlegs scurried away before Hiccup could stop him, but Snotlout stayed where he was, smirking.

"Will you please tell me what's going on?" Hiccup sighed, knowing Snotlout wouldn't, but he hated being kept in the dark. Maybe that was just lingering insecurity talking, but it still had ties to a painful time that he didn't want to be reminded of.

"Don't get your britches in a twist. It's just something we're not supposed to know. I only know because Ruff and Tuff told me about it. Really painfully, I might add. You're actually better off not figuring it out."

Which only piqued Hiccup's curiosity even more. "What? What am I better off not figuring out?"

But Snotlout just patted his shoulder condescendingly and walked back to Hookfang, dodging Hiccup's irritated swat. He felt a nudge at his elbow and looked down to see Toothless' green eyes peering up in gentle concern. The dragon jerked his head after Snotlout's direction, wanting to know if he had to give the rude boy an attitude adjustment.

"No, it's fine. If nobody's going to tell me, then I'll just have to go ask."

Hiccup was many things. Stubborn was certainly one of them.

He found the twins sitting at the table Bucket was currently stretched out on. He could hear them arguing still, but quietly, a rare thing for them. And Bucket was being quiet too â€" none of his moans loud enough to echo off the Hall's cavernous ceilings. He saw Tuff reach his hand into a bucket of ice water, pulling out a cloth and wringing it out. He folded it, pressing the rolled fabric to the reddened skin visible around Bucket's headgear. Ruffnut was doing the same on the other side of the table, and their argument was practically a mild debate compared to all the other violent ones Hiccup had heard.

"Uh, hey guys," he said awkwardly, wincing inwardly when they immediately stopped talking. Ruff looked at him calmly â€" the kind of calm that came right before a Terrible Terror tried to snap your fingers off. Tuff looked decidedly more vulnerable, a defensive scowl already starting on his face. Okay, apparently a sensitive thing he'd just walked in on here . . . which was going to get ugly fast unless Hiccup did something diplomatic.

"Can I help?"

"No," Ruff said tightly. "We got it. I'm sure there's a baby Terrible Terror that needs a nest built, somewhere."

"Idiot, that egg was a dud," Tuff reminded her, and after a moment of decision, he pushed the ice bucket toward Hiccup. "You can take over my side, my hand is numb." He shook it vigorously, trying to get the feeling back into his fingers. Ruff transferred her glare to Tuffnut, telling him without words what a terrible idea this was. "What? Maybe Hiccup should know what to do. It can't always be us."

"Why did you come over here?" Ruffnut asked Hiccup, with a hostility

she only usually reserved for her brother.

"Because I wanted to see if Bucket was okay," Hiccup answered, somewhat honestly. "You guys are helping him, whatever you're doing. He seems to be in less pain." He dipped the cloth into the freezing water, shivering slightly. He wrung it out and placed the cloth where Tuff had it earlier.

"You're getting water in his eyes," Ruff all but snarled, starting to reach over and correct him, but a kick from under the table stopped her. Tuff looked at her with an unreadable expression.

"He's trying to help," Her brother told her firmly. "Stop being such a troll butt."

Hiccup wrung the cloth out better the next time and tense silence reigned over the table. He was starting to realize he wasn't going to get anything but death glares or shrugs if he asked any questions, so he contented himself with just giving Tuffnut a slight break. Ruff resumed tending to Bucket on her side of the table and finally the man's quiet moans turned into snores. Tuffnut sighed and visibly lost tension in his shoulders. He stretched like a cat and his sister copied him, holding her arms above her head and arching her back to pop it.

"Okay, so now you can tell us why you really came over," Tuff said, and winced as Ruff kicked him under the table. He avoided her outraged expression and turned to Hiccup, coolly waiting. Hiccup was also starting to realize he should have just left once Bucket started snoring and left it at that. But it was too late now.

"Because I want to understand what's going on. You guys were pulled away to help him, and when I asked a simple question, Fishlegs lied to me " obviously out of terror. And Snotlout acted like he was privileged to have been let in on some big secret. Now that I'm here, you're acting really odd about it."

Ruffnut kicked Tuff under the table again, harder, making the boy yowl in protest and clutch his knee. "I told you that you were acting weird!"

"Both of you. What's going on? Do you know Bucket or something?"

"Know him?" Tuff snorted. "He's our Dad."

"Your . . . he's . . . okay, what?" Hiccup had totally not been expecting that. Old family friend, possibly. Cousin? Maybe. But this? "Wait, I thought Hagglesword Thorston was your dad?"

Tuffnut rolled his eyes, and started to explain. "Mom remarried when we were little kids. We took the Thorston name because we're under his roof and her kids are his kids and all that crap. Your Dad approved it because of what happened to Bucket and because he knew Mom couldn't take care of us by herself and protect the house from dragons."

"Wait . . . your saying that your Mom just threw Bucket out and remarried someone else?"

Ruff finally spoke up, her tone having lost much of its hostility. Obviously she'd been expecting a different reaction from Hiccup. "We weren't thrilled about it either. We were nine when . . . \_it\_ happened. One night, Dad was still this big strong Viking who could lift us as tall as himself â€" one to each arm. He loved to do that." Ruff smiled, remembering. "He was one of the best fighters on Berk - took down I don't even know how many dragons. And then one night . . . " Her smile slipped away.

" . . . first we thought he was going to die," Tuffnut continued, his own expression blank. Hiccup recognized it as grief - Tuffnut always seemed to shut down when he was really upset. "But he pulled through, and we were really happy. Mom told us to be careful and not roughhouse so much â€" to just give him some time. He was so dazed when he first came home. We thought he'd get over it. Then he started forgetting things. How to get dressed. How to eat. He forgot Mom's name, even the fact he was married to her."

"Never forgot us, though. He always smiles at us. Sometimes he doesn't know \_why\_, but he always smiles," Ruff said softly. Hiccup felt a lump in his throat, and he was unable to say anything. He'd never known this.

"We can't \_blame\_ Mom, you know? For remarrying and all that. And Hagglesword's always been decent to us. But Mom doesn't like it when we spend too much time with Bucket. She says we'll confuse him and make him upset. I think \_your\_ Dad knows better though," Tuffnut added.

"So . . . he knows you're his kids, right?" Hiccup asked softly.

Ruff looked at her brother, and shrugged lightly. "Sometimes he forgets he has kids. He asks other people. He asks us."

"That's what got him thrown out of Mom's house really," Tuffnut interjected, dully. "The asking."

"I can't believe my Dad just let that happen," Hiccup muttered.

Tuff shrugged. "No use arguing it now. Bucket doesn't even know where the house \_is\_. It's been burnt down so many times and rebuilt, you know? He knows where we all \_used\_ to live, I think."

"But this is not right," he said, starting to rise. He had half a mind to go talk to his father right now . . . A booted foot snagged his ankle and made him sit down on the bench hard with a yelp.

"Hiccup, you can't fix \_everything\_, okay?" Ruff told him, scowling. "Your Dad had his reasons, and it's not like it makes any difference to Bucket. We're here for him. We protect him when he needs it, just like he always used to protect us, when he \_could\_. We talk to him when we can. And it's just best this way. Mom's happy, Hagglesword's happy, Bucket's well, \_obliviously\_ happy."

"And if \_anyone\_ gives him a hard time about \_anything\_, " Tuff said, cracking his knuckles. "We're \_ecstatically\_ happy with the job of kicking their asses."

That explained a few things, actually. Hiccup was seeing certain connections between a series of amazingly intricate pranks and the fact that Dogsbreath's little gang no longer threw stones at Bucket's head whenever the man was carting his catch to the food stores.

"And I take it Snotlout learned about this by saying some really stupid things about him?"

"Yep. He said the fish in Bucket's cart had more brains than Bucket, which lead directly to a beat-down of\_ epic proportions\_, " Tuff bragged, flexing a bicep.

"From both of us. He cried like a little girl, and bled like a stuck pig," Ruff added, grinning savagely.

"But he took back everything he said while he was crying, so we're mostly cool now. Sort of."

"The next time he falls from a high place, I \_might\_ just distract Hookfang with a mirror," Ruff pondered.

"When did all this happen?" Hiccup asked, surprised he'd missed Snotlout getting the tar pounded out of him. He kind of would have \_liked\_ to see that actually.

Tuffnut thought about it for a while. "While you were unconscious from the battle with Grendle's Bride, actually."

"Figures." That would explain why he missed it. "Aaand what did Fishlegs do or say that has \_him\_ so terrified?"

"Nothing, but he watched the beat-down while squealing about how many 'points' or whatever we were taking off Snotlout's health, so I think he got the message."

"Okay, just one more question," Hiccup asked. "Why were the rest of us not supposed to know about this?"

Ruffnut sneered, but not at Hiccup. "Because we're all kids, and the adults don't think we can \_handle\_ stuff like this. So don't go telling everyone about it, okay? And for the love of Odin, don't go argue with your father. Mom's not aware we do all this for Dad, and she finds out . . ." Ruff trailed off and looked at Bucket, who was starting to come to. If their mom found out, they might not be able to even \_see\_ him anymore.

"Got it," Hiccup said softly. "Look . . . thanks for trusting me enough to tell me all this."

"Hey, lucky for you, you're cool enough to tell without having to \_hurt\_ you first," Tuffnut shrugged it off.

"Bragging rights over Snotlout," Ruffnut chimed sweetly.

Bucket began to moan lowly, and both twins turned their attention to the large man. Hiccup took his cue to leave this time, and walked back to where Toothless had settled in. The dragon purred at his approach, raising a wing and inviting him to rest beneath it as though he were a fledgling. Not one to argue right now, he took his

best friend's offer and leaned against him.

Hiccup had to admit he was surprised. He hadn't thought the twins had a nurturing bone in either one of their bodies. But the way they were now both leaning over Bucket as he woke up . . . a bizarre cross between overly protective dragons and eager little kids on Snoggletog morning . . . it was beginning to open Hiccup's eyes.

The twins had started arguing again about something non-consequential, the relief in their voices affecting the usual tough talk. Ruff reached across to give her brother a shove, and Bucket reached out and tugged her gently down to sit. Hiccup couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could hear Bucket's usual happily confused tone answering and he could see the twins relax next to each other to listen.

Hiccup thought about how sometimes Bucket clammed up when he was shy or upset or afraid " and how he seemed completely at ease, talking now with a confidence he hadn't often shown before. He was always kind to children, especially younger ones " perhaps believing his own two children were still that young. Wanting to be there for them, in the only way that still made sense.

"I guess everyone's got someone to protect, huh, bud?" he murmured to Toothless. The dragon trilled softly in response, looking at Hiccup momentarily before resting his head on his forepaws. "You know, between the Thorston twins, I bet Bucket's going to be the safest Viking on Berk."

Hiccup knew now that he was going to do his best to help make that true.

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